Telephone interview with Lan Nguyen Tran, South Vietnamese refugee rescued by USS *Kirk* (DE-1087). Mrs. Tran escaped from Saigon on 30 April 1975 as the city fell to the communists. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 12 April 2007.

Where were you from?

Saigon. My grandparents had an experience with the communists. They were from North Vietnam and they escaped in 1954. Then they moved to South Vietnam.

How did they get to South Vietnam?

By ship.

Did they come on U.S. Navy ships back then?

Yes.

Where were they from?

They were from Hanoi.

Were you born in Saigon?

Yes.

And then you married.

Yes. I married in June 1974. I was 9 months pregnant in April 1975.

Was your husband in the army?

No. He was in the Vietnamese Air Force and had been trained in the United States. He was 12 years older than me.

In April 1975, when the communists were moving toward Saigon, how did you escape?

My grandparents knew about communists and they knew we could not live with them. So, with a big group of people, they bought a boat. The boat was nearby on the river in Saigon just waiting for the time. A boat that was tied up near our boat left a few days earlier but the government brought it and the people on it back. So that wasn't a good time to leave the country. So on the 28th of April, my husband called and told my grandparents and the rest of the family to go to the boat and leave. He was at the air force base at Tan Son Nhut when he called home and told the family we had to go to the boat.

Did they take you along?

No. I had gone to Tan Son Nhut with my mother and my other uncle, who was a doctor. My aunt worked for American company so that's why she got a permit to leave in an airplane. But it was too late for me because by the time I got there the communists put the rockets in the airport. It was midnight so everybody had to leave the airport. My mom told me that we had better get out and that she would take me to the hospital because I would have the baby at any time.

But when I got back home everybody had already gone so I feel so lonely.

Did you actually go to the hospital?

I didn't have a chance. We had to get home. My mom sold her house and changed to U.S. dollars. By the time one of the drivers came back to my grandparent's house, I ask the driver, "Is that boat still there?"

He said, "Yes!"

I said, "Would you please take us to the boat?"

And he said, "Okay."

But he said he had to wait because he had to take another wife, pregnant like me, home because she didn't want to leave. She said it was too much hassle to leave when she was pregnant.

But he said, "Nothing will happen. Everything will be fine. So he had to take her home and then at my grandparent's house. I told the driver, "No, no. I want to go with you. Follow that woman, drop her, and then you take me to the boat."

So he said okay.

So he took you to the boat.

Yes. But it was very difficult to get from my grandparent's house to the boat because it was the 29th of April about 9 p.m. It was raining and storming and people were running. It was very hard to get through the traffic. And because the communists were coming, everyone had moved to Saigon.

Finally we got to the river but the boat wasn't there anymore. Far away, I see the other side of the river. I see the boat and recognize that boat. I asked the driver. "Is that the boat on the other side of the river?"

After he looks, he says, "Oh yeah."

And I said, "How we can get over there? There's no way we can swim or anything. It's too far away."

Then some people wearing military clothing and guns asked my driver, "Hey, You want to rent a little boat so you can get to that big boat?"

The driver said yes. And then he ask how much.

And they say, "You don't have to pay much. Anything will be okay."

But, by the time they are saying that, they take the bag which had all our valuables, from my driver. He had taken it from me earlier saying, "You are pregnant. Don't keep it. Let me keep it for you. Bad people will take it from you." It had money and jewelry in there from my mom. So I give to him.

Suddenly the bad people take the bag from his hand and run. He then follow them to take it back so they shoot at him. I say, "Hey, stop! Stop! They will shoot you so don't run after them!"

Did they shoot him?

No. They didn't hurt him, just make him scared.

Did you get the small boat to take you across the river?

No. There was no small boat at all. They were just trying to take advantage of us.

But suddenly--it happened like that--I saw the boat from the other side of the river come over to where we were. It was very strange. But I was very glad. I say, "Hey, the boat is here!"

But I still could not get in the boat because of the rocks on the riverbank, which were very slippery. My mom called and then the people on the boat hear my mom. They ask, "Who is that?"

My mom say our names and then three of my husband's cousins come down to help me to climb on the boat.

Where was your mother?

She with me. The same night, midnight of the 29th. The sailor who knew how to run the boat had already left by airplane so a man who didn't know how to operate the boat volunteered. That's why the boat was going from one side of the river to the other. Then they cannot go under the bridge because the water is so high. But finally that night after I get on, the water is lower and they able to go under the bridge and go down the river.

But before that, there was a lot of gunfire. They don't want us to leave.

The communists were shooting at you?

No, not the communists. The [South Vietnamese] soldiers were shooting at whoever wanted to leave the country. Actually they didn't shoot at us but just were shooting in the sky. The gunfire was very loud to scare us but finally the boat was able to get down to the ocean.

So you are now out in the ocean.

Yes. I'm on the boat with my mom and my in-laws.

Where was your husband at that time?

He's not there. He is at the airport--Tan Son Nhut–because he want to stay until the last minute. He had to stay. He said, "It's no good for a soldier to leave."

There is a Vietnamese doctor in the boat. I am feeling pain and they thought I will have a baby. And with all I had been through they thought I can have the baby at any time. It is already 9 months. So they thought I would have baby on that boat. They prepare even though they don't have anything to prepare. But luckily I don't have the baby, just the labor pains.

Later on, we feel our boat is shaking a lot. Then I look up from the bottom of the boat and see that a big wave is coming from the USS *Kirk*. I look up and see this very big ship. I don't even see the whole picture of the ship, just some of it. They don't come up next to our boat but instead they use the canoe [motor whaleboat] to come over to us with the translator and give us some food and water. Then they told us they would return.

Later a Vietnamese Navy ship came over and we went aboard it for safety. It's lucky that ship was empty. The name of the ship was *Ly Thuong Kiet* (HQ-16).

So they took you aboard this bigger ship.

That ship was empty, except for the sailors so they were able to take all the Vietnamese refugees on that ship.

So that ship was empty because the refugees who had been there had been moved to another ship.

Yes. Then they had to provide us with food because we had nothing. We stayed on that ship for about 2 days. Then the translator and others from the *Kirk* came over helping people.

One day Mr. Pham, the translator, came over and said that the people on the *Kirk* wanted to take people who were sick or those women who were over 7 months pregnant.

Then they brought you to the *Kirk*?

That's what they wanted to do but, at that time, I don't want to go. I say no because they wanted me to go alone and I wanted to stay with my mother. So then they took both of us. It was very dangerous the way they took me. First they had to put me in a basket and lower me by hand down to the ocean. Several sailors down there in the canoe take me from there. It was a very dark night and was very scary. I thought, "Oh, my God! Maybe I will drop into the ocean."

Then they took me to the *Kirk*. They put me in a basket and lifted me with some machine. It was very dark and all I could see were the orange vests the sailors were wearing.

What did the ship look like to you when you came aboard?

It was so big I was not able to see the whole ship at once. When I got there I was so tired and I again had a labor pain. They take me to the doctor. But he said, "Not yet."

So Chief Burwinkel looked at you and didn't think you were ready to have the baby.

Yes. After that they put me into a big room with other pregnant women, I think about five. They felt I was the one who would have the first child. Other people, had had their second pregnancy, but for me it was the first.

Did they treat you very nicely?

Yes. The captain knocked on the door and came over to say hi to us. He said, "Hurry, we want one child born and we want the child named for the ship. The ship will then be a sponsor of the baby. So hurry, hurry!" He was smiling and everyone remembers that.

But no one have a baby on the ship. Capt. Jacobs give one of the crew members, Mr. Cox, a special assignment to take care of the pregnant women and their families. Every day he would come over and take us to the breakfast room where the sailors eat. We get in line like the other sailors. The food so good! But all I eat is a little bit of corn. I don't feel like eating anything.

Donald Cox was young, too. He told me he is 19. Every day he took me up on the deck so I can have some fresh air. I saw other helicopter parked there on the deck. One day he have a Polaroid camera. He took my picture and I took his picture in front of the helicopter.

But we get along well even though at that time I don't speak English. I just understand a little bit but I don't speak. In high school we learned a little but didn't have a chance to practice anything. But somehow I understand him perfectly and he understand my language.

I stayed on the ship for 12 days. It took so long but at that time, we did not know why. Now I do. Capt. Jacobs told me at the reunion why it take so long. Halfway to the Philippines, he got the order to go back to Vietnam to help with other refugees. He thought if he turn the ship around during the day, maybe we will know and be scared. So he wait for night when we are asleep, and he slowly turn back to Vietnam. And that's why it take 12 days in the ocean.

Before I get off the ship at Subic Bay, Donald Cox give me a picture of him and my picture. Then he put something on the back. He say something like: "I'm sorry to see you go." He told me he have a girlfriend in California. He told me if I cannot locate my husband and I need help, here is his girlfriend's address.

When I get to Subic Bay they first put me in the naval hospital right away. When I get in there, I was the only one. I felt scared and lonely so I told the sailors that I wanted to go out with the other Vietnamese people. So they let me go. I just stay in Subic Bay for one night.

The next day they put us on a big commercial ship and took us to Guam. From that time I don't feel hungry and do not eat. I remember they give everybody one box of food with cigarettes, fruit cocktail--a military ration. I give it away to other people. I just get one can of fruit cocktail, that's all.

When we arrived in Guam, they took me to the U.S. Navy Hospital there. And that night I have a baby, a little girl. I remembered that Capt. Jacobs had said he wanted to put the name of the ship for the baby. But because I have a baby girl I cannot put first name Kirk for the baby girl. So her middle name is Kirk. My baby's full name is . . . My husband's last name is Tran and my maiden name is Nguyen. And then her middle name is Kirk. And then her first name is Giang Tien, which means "angel from the sky."

So your little girl's name is Tran Nguyen Kirk Giang Tien.

Yes. I stay for 3 days in the hospital. I stay in the twin bed with my baby in a big room with other patients. On the third day I saw Capt. Jacobs come in with other sailors to visit the Vietnamese refugee patients. He saw me and asked my baby's name. And I told him. After that I don't see him until the reunion.

How were you reunited with your husband?

When the baby was 10 days old, we flew on an airplane to Camp Pendleton near San Diego. I then went to the Red Cross and they try to reunite people missing in three camps. One was in Arkansas, one in Pennsylvania, one in Florida. They find my husband in Fort Chaffee in Arkansas. He went to the Red Cross, too.

How did he get out of Vietnam?

He told me he left on the morning of April 30. He said he was in the last group to leave. They went by helicopter. He said it wasn't working and they had to fix it. Then, finally they were able to fly to Thailand. I don't remember where he went from there.

Where were you reunited with him?

At Camp Pendleton 3 months later.

It must have been a very happy day for you.

Yes. He didn't know that I had made it out of Vietnam. A friend told me that while he was at Fort Chaffee, every day he went to the Red Cross to see if my name was there. He could not find it and he was losing hope. Every day he cry. The other pilots had been able to take their wives. He had stayed longer because he followed military orders and so now he felt guilt because he was unable to take care of me.

Where did you move after you were reunited?

We were at Camp Pendleton for 6 months and then we had a sponsor in Baltimore, Maryland. In September '75, I, my baby, my husband, his parents, and his sister and brother moved there and lived in Baltimore for 9 months. It is the custom to stay with your husband's family. My mother went to Canada because my sister was already there.

We arrived in Baltimore on Saturday and on Monday they took my husband and his father to look for a job and they accept them right away. He worked right away because he didn't have a problem with English.

He work for an optical office that are making glasses. The church only support us for 1 month of rent. The next month we able to pay rent and the church don't have to pay rent for us and we were able to support ourselves.

At that time, even though I have a baby, when the baby get sick the people from the church take me and my baby to the health department for the treatments and the immunizations shots for my daughter. But I don't even know anything about Medicare or food stamps or nothing, and they don't tell us anything about that, either. So we never have help from social service. My husband and my husband's father work. At that time in Baltimore, the rent very low, I think only $150 a month.

In front of my house was a cemetery. When I go in my bathroom and look out a window, I saw the cemetery and it was so scary!

At least the neighbors were quiet.

Yes, very quiet. It was close to the church. Nine months after we arrived in Baltimore, we moved to California. My husband have a cousin who live there. They said, "Come over here." And it was so cold in Maryland we couldn't stand it so that's why we left there. When my husband told people at the church that we want to move, they really sad. They say, "No, don't go. If you go to California, you may be unemployed. You don't have a job there."

But you went anyway.

Yes. We went anyway.

Did your husband have a job there?

Before he decide to go, he already check with his cousin. "Can I have a job there?"

He say yes. When you come over Monday I take you to my job.

So as soon as you got to California, your husband already had a job.

Yes. But when we left Baltimore, we just had enough money. My husband sold the car and then had enough money to buy the tickets for the family--for me, his parents, and for his two sisters, and his brother. And we went back to California. On Monday his cousin took him to his work and they accepted him. And do you know what he did?

No.

Shipping and receiving. But they pay good. So he work there and I go to school. Later on, he go to school, too. After that, he work for advertising company doing some drawing, some commercials, and doing some banners.

And then you had a son.

Yes. I have a son, James Tran.

Is your daughter married?

Not yet. She's still single and she like to travel. She says, "I not marry until I'm maybe 35.

How old is your son, James?
He born in 1977.

I understand your husband has passed away.
He had a heart attack and passed away same month as 9/11. He die on 9/15, almost 7 years ago.

So you live in Long Beach.
Yes.

What is your job?
I work for the Social Security Administration in Long Beach.

I want to thank you very much for talking with me. It's been a delight to get to know you.
Thank you.

I'm hoping that you come to the reunion.
I will.

I want to meet you and shake your hand.
I want to meet you, too.